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The Necessity of Original Photoplay Material

By COL. JASPER EWING BRADY



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*One of a Series of Lectures Especially
Prepared for Student-Members
of The Palmer Plan*



PALMER PHOTOPLAY CORPORATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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COL. JASPER EWING BRADY

COLONEL JASPER EWING BRADY spent fourteen years as a commissioned officer in the United States Army, and later served as Lieutenant-Colonel of the Thirty-second Regiment, National Guard of New York State, before entering upon his screen career. The army title has been difficult to shake off, and Mr. Brady is affectionately known as "the Colonel" to his many friends and associates.

Colonel Brady began his photoplay work in the Vitagraph Company, and enjoyed a long and pleasant association with that organization. Later he acted as managing editor of the scenario department for the Universal Film Manufacturing Company in both the New York and Pacific Coast studios. At the present time he is head of the scenario department for Metro in New York City.

It is safe to say that no one connected with the photoplay profession has had more intensive experience in the selection and purchase of screen stories than Colonel Brady. A hard worker, early and late, and a careful and rapid reader, he is capable of handling an amount of material that would frighten the average reader with its bulk. In spite of this he has repeatedly proven that his judgment is accurate, and his choice of screen material has been productive of the most satisfactory results. In addition to these capabilities, Colonel Brady is a writer of many successful scenarios, including "THE ISLAND OF REGENERATION," "THE ISLAND OF SURPRISE," "SURPRISES OF AN EMPTY HOTEL," "LITTLE ANGEL OF CANON CREEK," "HERO OF SUBMARINE D-2," and many others.

FOR many years one of the standard monthly magazines of the United States has conducted a department of editorial comment under the caption of "The Editor's Easy Chair." This is an exceedingly appropriate and well-chosen line, but it would never, never do in connection with a scenario editor, for he invariably sits in one of the uneasiest chairs that may be imagined. The title, "Scenario Editor," is not entirely satisfactory, but it seems to have become permanent and authentic through common usage.

2. I believe I am reasonably qualified to judge the uneasiness of the scenario editor's position, for I have been reading, considering, recommending, rejecting and having to do with the final purchase of screen stories, as well as writing original photoplays, with various large motion-picture producing organizations for many years. It seems to be natural for every man to emphasize the difficulties of his own job in life, yet I believe I may readily and logically prove why the individual upon whom rests the responsibility for buying screen plays labors under one of the heaviest burdens in the entire series of co-ordinated activities necessary to the completion of a motion-picture production.

3. The life of a motion picture may be divided into five parts, as follows:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Creation..... | Author |
| Selection..... | Scenario editor |
| Production..... | { Studio staff, inclusive of continuity writer, director, cameraman, actors, etc., etc. |
| Distribution..... | Film rental and booking agency |
| Exhibition..... | Theater and audience |

4. The production, distribution, and exhibition of pictures may be looked upon as one unit in a general way, and the creation of the story as another. Between these two sits the unit of selection—the scenario editor, in his uneasy chair. In all fairness, do you wonder that it is an uneasy position? On one hand is a multitude of millions of motion-picture theater-goers discussing the pictures of yesterday, watching those of today, and eagerly clamoring for those of tomorrow. Day after day this multitude occupies theaters in which millions of dollars have been invested, and in connection with which millions more are being spent in service and advertising. In close relation to the exhibitors are the distributing agencies scattered among all the cities of the civilized world, and constantly demanding their weekly supplies of new films to pass on to the exhibitors and their audiences. In each studio with which a scenario editor is associated we find a group of directors and stars, all receiving high salaries.

5. Working in co-operation with these directors and stars is a small army of staff continuity writers, actors, cinematographers, scenic artists and innumerable other specialized craftsmen, all busy with the intricate process of motion-picture production. When one film is completed, another must be begun, else there will be a term during which production ceases, while the enormous payroll and overhead expense goes on. Not only this, but if production is delayed the producer is unable to live up to his contract with the distributors, to whom he must supply a certain number of films within a given time. If the distributors' supply is cut short, the exhibitor finds himself with a theater filled with people, but no pictures to exhibit. Thus the business machinery of producing, distributing and exhibiting pictures must move smoothly, without a single slip in any cog or gear.

6. The tremendous importance of this may be realized when we contemplate the fact that the making and showing of motion pictures is now rated as the fifth largest industry in the United States. All of this vast investment and business movement rests upon the foundation of stories and the selection of stories. The scenario editor is the connecting link between all the artistic and business intricacies that I have mentioned and the source of supply of stories, inclusive of well-constructed photoplays written by trained photoplaywrights, published novels, magazine stories and produced plays of the speaking stage, which may be adapted to the screen, and a vast quantity of utterly worthless material coming from all sorts and conditions of men and women throughout the world. It takes no highly developed quality of perception to understand that there are valid reasons for the uneasiness of the editor in his chair.

7. Understand, this discourse is not intended to build a case for myself nor for my contemporaneous friends who occupy positions similar to mine. I am not seeking sympathy, nor is my motive self-aggrandizement; I am merely approaching definite consideration of the subject that is uppermost in the minds of everyone who has any serious interest in making or witnessing motion pictures—the sources of stories in the years to come. Aside from the essentials of life, such as food, fuel and clothing, no question of supply and demand is more insistent than this.

8. The existence of the Standard Oil Company and its competitors depends upon the supply of crude petroleum, but should this supply ever be exhausted science would promptly and effectively discover something else to furnish motive power for automobiles and serve the many other uses for which this product is now used. Should the gold and silver supply of the world disappear, some

other medium of exchange would automatically take its place, and so on *ad infinitum*. But motion pictures can never be produced without stories, any more than novels and magazines can be published without stories, or plays shown on the speaking stage unless there is a story to tell in each case.

9. The problem is more urgent in the case of motion pictures because the output is infinitely greater. This in turn is because the life of each motion picture is much shorter than that of the successful novel or stage play, and even than that of the stories appearing in a weekly or monthly publication, for, while the picture appears for a few weeks and then is withdrawn, the novel and stage play frequently go on for years and decades, and a magazine may lie about and be read and reread indefinitely.

10. The question of a continuous supply of screen stories is permanent and not temporary, for the screen play is here to remain. And do not underestimate my meaning in the use of the word "permanent." The motion picture is not a thing of this generation to be forgotten by the next. It is only a quarter of a century old, but mark you well, it is to endure for centuries. It is the eighth art, and it will remain and make progress just as long as we have literature, music, drama, poetry, sculpture, painting, and architecture. There is a thrill in the thought that we are living at the time of the birth of this new art. Back through the mists of the ages the others had each its own separate nativity, and each has grown slowly, laboriously, but continuously from its first crude form to what it is today.

11. Of all the arts, the motion picture is the most universal, the most pliable, and must therefore of necessity be the most prolific. This brings us directly back to the subject of this lecture. If the people of the world demand an

uninterrupted flow of new motion-picture productions, whence shall come the stories from which these productions must be wrought?

12. Let us, therefore, set about analyzing the situation in order that we may arrive at a logical and definite conclusion. Wherever three or four people who are interested in the photoplay are gathered together, one may hear constant repetition of the phrases, "new art," "fifth largest industry," "still in its infancy," and other such axiomatic fragments which through over-familiarity have come to sound exceedingly trite and meaningless. This is probably because the perfectly true statements are repeated more or less thoughtlessly and without a sufficiently complete comprehension of what they really mean, and of what tremendous facts lie behind them.

13. The photoplay does comprise a new art, and in twenty-five years the handling of its product has created an industry that *is* the fifth largest in the United States, in view of the amount of capital invested in all of its component parts, and being only a quarter of a century old, it is by all means still in its infancy, with its gigantic possibilities scarcely touched. These affirmations are not to be uttered lightly, nor to be scorned as being bromidic. When the first playwrights of Greece were laying that distant but firm foundation for the drama of today, they encountered far greater difficulties, endured more scorn and ridicule, and were in every way greater martyrs to their art than are any of the earnest men and women who are so sincerely and sometimes thanklessly striving to make of the photoplay a thing of permanent beauty, entertainment, education, and usefulness.

14. The following, recently from the pen of Rupert Hughes, is veracious and appropriate :

“Was not Aeschylus driven from the theater by an outraged audience and put on trial for sacrilege? Sophocles was refused a production once, was accused of base commercialism, and his greatest work, the Oedipus, was considered inferior to a play by an obscure author. Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote each about a hundred plays and won prizes for only one in six.

“Euripides and Aristophanes are among the most solemnly regarded names in literature, yet the most ferocious critic of the movies never said anything worse of the worst movie than Aristophanes said of Euripides, whom he accused of every banality, sensationalism and plagiarism, and of the immediate death of whose trash he was certain. And no slap-stick movie ever presented has contained any coarser, cheaper, staler horseplay than the antics that fill Aristophanes' comedies, to say nothing of the indecencies that astound even the least puritanical readers.

“Aristophanes' characters tossed figs and nuts into the audience to please the groundlings, and once he asked the bald-headed men to vote for his play because the author was bald, too!

“The moving picture should be welcomed as a glorious new language, a gift of the generous gods which, like the drama, painting, sculpture, architecture, verse, fiction, and the other arts, must purvey an enormous amount of commonplace material to the vast public, but incidentally brings forth many beautiful moments of passion, grace, tenderness, laughter, regret, despair, rapture, and picturesque illumination of life.”

15. I have quoted from Major Hughes in order that we may for the moment look back through the centuries to the birth of spoken drama and the struggles and heart-aches of the fathers of those plays which are now reverently regarded as eternal classics. Their difficulties were more in the way of getting the idea of drama accepted by the populace of Greece, and of obtaining serious consideration for the plays that they wrote and presented. Let us then jump abruptly from those far-away times to the

United States, the birthplace of the photoplay, in the year 1920, and give thoughtful consideration to some vital data.

16. There is an element of banality in the presentation of statistics, but I know of no more effective manner of awakening the minds of the students of the photoplay to the point I wish to make in the present case.

17. In the United States alone there are:

15,000 regular theaters showing moving pictures

12,000 legitimate theaters showing moving pictures exclusively.

160 theaters, approximately, showing pictures for a full week.

2,500 changing two or three times each week.

75 per cent changing their program daily.

Daily attendance at picture theaters, 13,000,000.

Total income of moving-picture theaters in 1919, \$750,000,000.

There are approximately 890 different chains of moving-picture theaters in the country.

18. It is obvious, in view of these figures, that the problem of the producers of photoplays is not that of inducing people to accept their product, but rather is the quest for sufficient story material to supply the perpetual and ever-increasing demand. Why is the demand greater than the supply? Let us see. The photoplay is unquestionably a new art, yet it inherits something from each of the other arts. Having grown from little more than a mechanical toy to the gigantic thing that it is today in so few years, people have been slow in realizing that the photoplay is a separate form of expression, and not merely an interesting relative of literature, drama, and painting,

for it is to these three of the fine arts that the screen-drama is most closely related, and to drama in particular.

19. What has been the source of the material that has been used up to the present time in the production of motion pictures? It is quite unnecessary to go into details at this time, for Mr. Palmer has elaborately dealt with the subject in Chapter I of the Handbook. We all know that the short-length films of the early days portrayed anything in the nature of a moving object, for audiences were satisfied with the novelty of movement in pictures. Then came the little sequences of incidents, and when audiences ceased to be satisfied with these began the serious attempt to tell complete stories. Right at that point was where the photoplay ceased to be a toy and started to be an art, and right there all the trouble began, for producers, not recognizing it as a separate and independent means of expression, chose to utilize it as a vehicle for the adaptation of written literature and spoken drama. In some cases such adaptations were highly satisfactory, and in others they were much more effective than in their original form. These, however, were merely the exceptions that proved the rule. The average novel is not suitable for photoplay production, because the novel is a novel and the photoplay a photoplay.

A Screen Drama!

20. The average drama of the speaking stage is not successfully adaptable to the screen, because the drama of the stage is spoken and the screen is a medium of silence. This was not recognized at first, and book after book and play after play was produced as a motion picture. Then the thoughtful people of the new profession gradually began to see the light, as the realization crept over them that the successful photoplay must be a photoplay and nothing else, always allowing for the occasional exceptions

in the way of adaptations which have existed, do exist, and undoubtedly shall exist indefinitely. They saw that the new art involved a new technique and consequently demanded a new kind of raw material.

21. Thereupon a new difficulty arose. Quantities of photoplays were necessary, but with the exception of a little scattering of men and women who had been in close contact with motion-picture production, there were no photoplaywrights, so in spite of the desire of the producers to obtain photoplays written directly for the screen, it was found necessary to continue turning out the hybrids that resulted from the union of literature or spoken drama and the photoplay. The bookshelves of the world were ransacked and the manuscripts of dramas old and new were dug up and rewritten for the screen.

22. Meanwhile producers were appealing to the general public for stories. They held prize contests and used every available means of encouraging people to write suitable vehicles for screen production. These efforts were occasionally productive of useful results, but to a very great extent they were not in the least so. The vast majority of people who attempted to sell photoplays or to win prizes in the competitions knew nothing of this form of expression nor how to approach it. Some wrote stories that were essentially interesting, but that were so greatly dependent upon dialogue and description that they were utterly unavailable. The biggest proportion flooded the studios with manuscripts containing mere disconnected sequences of incidents, because this was the sort of thing that they had seen upon the screen in the years gone by, and they vaguely assumed that this was what was wanted.

23. As a result of the studios advertising for stories, every scenario editor was deluged with thousands of manuscripts of every imaginable kind, and from all sorts and

conditions of people. The quantity of material that came flooding in was too great in each studio for any one man to handle, so each scenario editor was given a staff of readers. Here again was a difficulty, for while these readers were frequently excellent judges of literature, they very often knew little of photoplay fundamentals. Even when they were thoroughly competent in this particular, their work was discouraging and more or less thankless, for not one in a thousand of the submitted stories was acceptable. This was true not only of the work of amateurs, but of many writers whose reputations were established as creators of novels, short stories and newspaper material. They were in exactly the same position that the makers of motion pictures were at the start—they were unaware that they were dealing with the eighth art, and not one of the older forms of expression.

24. In some rare instances this fact was realized, but in spite of this perception most of the writers found themselves unable to comprehend the fundamentals of the photoplay through lack of study, and so merely tried in a blundering way and failed. When occasionally a man or woman did succeed in writing story material that was directly acceptable for photoplay production, he or she was commandeered at what was a good salary in those days and given a position on some studio staff. Some of these proved that they had only two or three stories in their systems and soon dropped out of sight, while others made progress and are today numbered among the real successes as writers, directors or producers.

25. Still the quest for stories continued, and whatever came nearest to being acceptable screen material was produced. Some of it was excellent and some was dismally inferior. Then there came a time when even though original stories, created by photoplaywrights who had

absorbed a complete comprehension of screen values and possessing high qualities of merit, were received, they were rejected in favor of recently successful novels or stage plays because the business men at the head of the various companies saw prestige and financial success in the free advertising value of a story or a play that was widely known before it was conveyed to the screen. Sums far greater than were received for the original work were paid for the screen rights.

26. Emerging from these varying conditions came a situation which exists today and shall probably continue to exist increasingly and permanently. This may be summed up in the brief statement that the scenario editor (using the title as a sweeping composite) is seeking stories suitable for photoplay production, regardless of whether they are written by famous authors or unknowns, or whether they are adaptations or originals. Time and experience having proven that adaptations are not successful in the large percentage of cases, we are aware, through a logical process of elimination, that *the one great unquestioned and unceasing demand is for original photoplays written by photoplaywrights who are trained craftsmen*. The successful writer of any sort must be a craftsman, and craftsmanship is born in no one. It must be acquired through intelligent and persistent study and practice.

27. In this brief space I am not going to discuss to any extent whatever the methods and means of photoplay plot construction. I am not a teacher. Most of my waking hours are now and during the past several years have been devoted to the work of searching the world for screenable stories. I do not care who the author may be, whether he or she is famous or unknown, nor does it make any difference to me whether the story has been published or is an original. What I and the other editors, directors and pro-

ducers throughout the industry want is *stories containing screen values*, and knowing as I do that the supply of published material can fill but a very small part of the demand, the hope for the great mass of future material lies largely with the writers of original photoplays—earnest students of the screen who devote time and mental concentration to the one definite object of becoming craftsmen and of making practical use of their skill and knowledge when they have succeeded in doing so.

28. I marvel at what seems to be the popular idea of the attitude and inclination of the average scenario editor. A great many novices in the writing game seem to think that he is an unsympathetic individual who delights in rejecting submitted stories and who accepts and pays for a manuscript only with the greatest reluctance and distaste. I wish such misguided and pessimistic people could witness the almost hectic scenes of elation that take place when a purchasable story is received and accepted. An acceptable manuscript strikes joy to the heart of the scenario editor to about the same extent that the color of gold ore gladdens and enthuses the weary prospector. The editor is paid to find stories, and the process of rejection is merely a negative necessity that results from incompetence, lack of study and preparation, inappropriate material submitted to the wrong producing company, and other similar reasons. The wide-awake student must be constantly alert and must study and work just as earnestly and intensively as though he were learning to be an architect, a sculptor, or a painter.

29. In considering the spoken drama we have twenty-five hundred years of precedent, while in dealing with the photoplay we are groping our way across the misted threshold of a new art, and feeling our way carefully through strange and unfamiliar ways. It is for this reason

that producers frequently change their policies and that the story demand fluctuates accordingly. From the most inexperienced tyro to the great masters of photoplay making, inclusive of all and sundry who are in any way connected with the creation and production of motion pictures, we are in a sense pioneers, and must therefore combat a certain amount of uncertainty in our progress. The progress is being made, however, surely and certainly. More good pictures have been exhibited during the year 1920 than in any preceding year. As standards of production are raised, the quality of thought and effort exerted by photoplaywrights must be increased to a like degree.

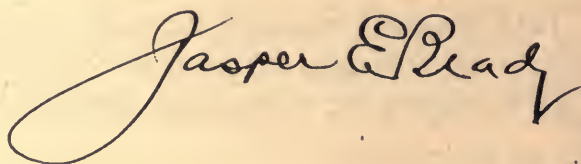
30. The rewards are worth working for, though, and will be increasingly so as the years go by. We shall eventually have color photography and the stereoscopic effect that will give greater depth and naturalness to the projected picture. Many bright minds are working on these and other problems of lesser importance, and in these modern days we have a habit of solving anything that we attack, no matter how difficult it may be. Whatever improvements and advancements may be made, we must still depend upon the photoplaywright for the foundation stone of all our efforts.

31. I have doubtless reiterated much that you already know, but it is only through reiteration that you may fully realize and surmount the tremendous obstacle of story shortage.

32. I venture to say that there is scarcely a studio in the United States now engaged in active production that would not purchase a stack of original stories if just the right sort of material could be found. Just as rapidly as more thinking men and women become conversant with the technique of photoplay composition and succeed in

creating an increased supply of screenable offerings, there will be a corresponding increase in the number of original manuscripts purchased and produced, and a like decrease in the production of previously published books and magazine stories. The entire situation lies in the hands of alert and progressive students of the screen.

33. Until we have enough new photoplaywrights and new stories to meet the demands of the producers, we shall by all means have to go on buying published material. No class of creative minds ever stood face to face with greater opportunities for fame and cash remuneration than does the scattering of student photoplaywrights today. There is one vital fact that each of these individuals should grasp firmly and keep in plain view at all times, and that is that salable photoplays cannot be created merely as a result of the desire to create, or by superficial reading of textbooks, and hasty, careless "dashing off" of manuscripts. Each separate success must be based upon a firm and lasting foundation of knowledge that can come only through hard study and continuous, practical work. If each reader of this lecture will carry away this one salient thought, I shall be satisfied.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jasper E. Brady". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background. The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the word "Brady".

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